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ABSTRACT

A survey of 857 teachers and field studies in 23 elementary classrooms during two school years provided data on whether teachers have conceptions of reading, the nature of those conceptions, how they develop over time, and the degree to which they govern the pattern of instructional decisions in reading. The results suggest seven general principles regarding teacher conceptions: teachers do have conceptions of reading, most teachers have more than one conception of reading, teachers explain their instructional decisions with categorizable statements that represent "nonreading" conceptions, some teachers possess more complex conceptions than others, teacher conceptions seem to vary in stability from teacher to teacher, a teacher's reading conception may be related to the grade level and student ability levels, and teachers modify and change their conceptions of reading and reading instruction over time. In view of these principles, the relationship between a teacher's reading beliefs and instructional decision making appears to be fluid: a teacher's conception of reading is a "free-floating" element that has little meaning until it is filtered through the teacher's nonreading conceptions and applied to specific teaching contexts. (RL)

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TEACHER CONCEPTIONS OF READING AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON INSTRUCTION

Robert Bawden
Sandra Buike, and Gerald G. Duffy

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Teacher Conceptions of Reading and Their Impact on Instruction[1]

Robert Bawden
Sandra Buike, and Gerald G. Duffy[2]

A growing body of research suggests that effective teachers are decision makers who engage in information processing (Shulman, 1975; Shulman & Elstein, 1975). Such research on teaching is of particular interest to reading educators because of growing evidence that instructional effectiveness in reading is related to teachers rather than to programs (Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Early, 1976).

If teachers' decision-making skills make the difference, it is important to know what guides and governs these decisions. Many educational leaders point to teachers' conceptions as the crucial variable. For instance, Brophy and Good (1974) say that it is the teacher's belief system or conceptual base which is especially important; a University of Wisconsin report (Note 1) states that it is the teacher's own thoughts and conceptualizations of the instructional process which makes a difference; Combs, Blume, and Newman (1974) say the teacher's "private world of perceptions" determines effectiveness.

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[1]This paper is a synopsis of research symposia presented at the annual conference of the International Reading Association, 1979, and the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, 1979. Special thanks are due the following researchers who aided in the planning and the collection and analysis of data for this study: Richard Allington and Anne Franzen, State University of New York, Albany; Rebecca Barr and Carol Spenser, University of Chicago; Byron Brown, Susan Florio, Dennis Guiser, Lonnie McIntyre, William Metheny, Luthene Pommer, Daniel Saks, and Lee Shulman, Institute for Research on Teaching.

[2]Robert Bawden is a fourth-grade teacher with East Lansing Public Schools who, as a research collaborator at IRT, works with the Conceptions of Reading Project. Sandra Buike is a research intern with the project. Gerald G. Duffy is coordinator of that project and a professor of elementary and special education.

Reading educators pursue a similar but narrower hypothesis in which the focus is not conceptions generally but reading conceptions in particular. For instance, McKee (1967) points to the importance of "the teacher's understanding of what reading instruction is." Carroll and Chall (1975) conclude that the teacher's system of beliefs about how different children learn to read is crucial. Cunningham (1977) suggests that an important factor is the teacher's beliefs about the reading process. Goodman and Watson (1977) argue that teachers should be able to articulate the reading program's theoretical base. Harste and Burke (1977) say that every teacher possesses an implicit model of reading, which can be discovered through observation. Kamil and Pearson (1979) provide the most straightforward statement of the role of reading conceptions when they describe three reading models, stating that these different models of reading suggest different instructional practices and that teachers theoretically make different instructional decisions depending upon their particular model (or conception).

This study investigates whether teachers have conceptions of reading, the nature of those conceptions, how they develop over time, and the degree to which these conceptions guide and govern the pattern of instructional decisions in reading.

Methodology

Two kinds of methodology were employed: teacher surveys using a Propositional Inventory and naturalistic field studies in 23 classrooms (10 during 1977-78 and 13 during 1978-79).

The Propositional Inventory was designed to serve two major purposes: (1) to provide exploratory data regarding whether teachers think about reading in conceptual patterns and (2) to provide a tool for selecting teachers for observational study. The categories covered in the inventory were based on a literature search which isolated five major conceptual views of reading: linear skills, basal text, natural language, interest, and integrated curriculum. For each conception, nine propositions reflecting that conception were selected and placed on a Likert scale, creating a 45-item inventory. This was then administered to determine the nature of teacher conceptions of reading and to study the relationship between certain demographic teaching characteristics and teachers' conceptions of reading. (Detailed information regarding the development and reliability of the Propositional Inventory is reported in Duffy & Metheny, Note 2.)

The naturalistic field study was conducted in 23 classrooms and included teachers from three states selected on the basis of data obtained from piloting the Propositional Inventory and by a variety of nomination procedures. Approximately 20 all-day and half-day classroom observations of each teacher's instructional practices were made and four to 10 interviews were conducted with each teacher.[3] As shown in Figure 1, this aspect of the study was composed of two branches.

The left-hand branch focused on determining teacher conceptions, with a conception defined as the sum of the statements the teacher offered as explanations for teacher decisions (particularly in reading).

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[3]Consequently, the findings reported in this paper reflect nearly 300 classroom interviews, 50 formal interviews, and numerous informal interviews of 23 teachers over two school years. A "formal interview" is one conducted at a scheduled time and in which the interviewer follows a previously-constructed interview guide. An "informal interview" is one in which the interviewer spontaneously questions the teacher about incidents noted during the observation.

These statements were collected by "triangulating" (Denzen, 1970, 1978) three sources of data; in this case, the sources were statements collected over time from planned formal interviews, spontaneous interviews, and comments made by the teacher to the pupils or the observer in the process of teaching. These statements were then categorized; if a category contained five or more statements, we considered it to be a conception.

The right hand branch of Figure 1 focuses on the study of teacher practices. Again, three sources of data were collected: field notes of observations, transcripts of audio tapes of reading periods, and analyses of pupil activities during reading periods. These were studied to determine the teacher's classroom instructional patterns.

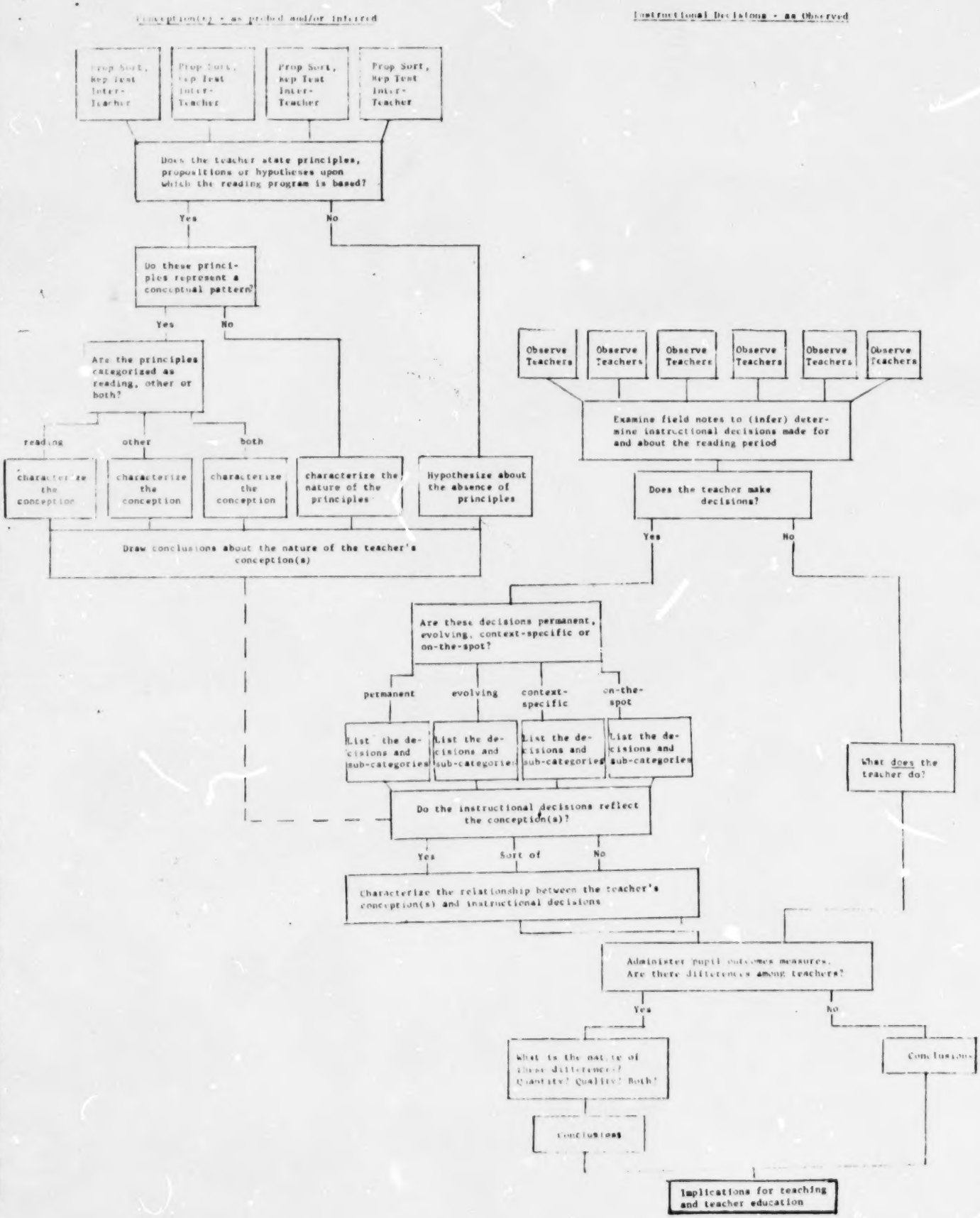
We then compared the instructional patterns to the teacher's conceptions to determine whether the categories of statements were reflected in the teacher's instructional practices. If at least five instructional activities or patterns reflecting a particular conception were observed and/or if the time spent in reading activities reflected a conception, we determined that the conception guided and governed the instructional practice.

Results and Discussion

Teacher Surveys

The Propositional Inventory was used to survey teachers at two points in time. The first time, 602 teachers in three separate school districts were surveyed, and we focused primarily on determining the nature of conceptions. The second time, 257 teachers were surveyed and attempts were made to establish relationships between teachers' demographic data and conceptions of reading.

Figure 1: Procedures for Analyzing our Data


Conceptions - as probed and/or inferred
Instructional Decisions - as Observed
Prop Sort, Rep Test Inter-Teacher
Prop Sort, Rep Test Inter-Teacher
Prop Sort, Rep Test Inter-Teacher
Prop Sort, Rep Test Inter-Teacher
Does the teacher state principles, propositions or hypotheses upon which the reading program is based?
Yes
No
Do these principles represent a conceptual pattern?
Yes
No
Are the principles categorized as reading, other or both?
reading
other
both
characterize the conception
characterize the conception
characterize the conception
characterize the nature of the principles
Hypothesize about the absence of principles
Draw conclusions about the nature of the teacher's conception(s)
Observe Teachers
Observe Teachers
Observe Teachers
Observe Teachers
Observe Teachers
Observe Teachers
Examine field notes to (infer) determine instructional decisions made for and about the reading period
Does the teacher make decisions?
Yes
No
Are these decisions permanent, evolving, context-specific or on-the-spot?
permanent
evolving
context-specific
on-the-spot
List the decisions and sub-categories
List the decisions and sub-categories
List the decisions and sub-categories
List the decisions and sub-categories
What does the teacher do?
Do the instructional decisions reflect the conception(s)?
Yes
Sort of
No
Characterize the relationship between the teacher's conception(s) and instructional decisions
Administer pupil outcomes measures. Are there differences among teachers?
Yes
No
What is the nature of these differences? Quantity? Quality? Both?
Conclusions
Conclusions
Implications for teaching and teacher education

We found that teachers do have reading conceptions, but that they do not match the theoretical categories so frequently discussed in the reading literature. Instead, teachers tend to respond in more general categories -- categories we labeled "content-centered" and "pupil-centered." The former encompasses conceptions such as basal text and linear skills, while the latter encompasses natural language, interest, and integrated curriculum models.

In addition, a teacher's conception of reading seems to be associated most strongly with number of years experience. This was demonstrated by the fact that the older, more experienced teachers tended to have "content-centered" conceptions, while the younger and less experienced teachers had more "pupil-centered" conceptions.

Naturalistic Field Studies

Because data from the Propositional Inventory supported our hypothesis that teachers possess conceptions of reading, we initiated classroom field studies to gain insight into the relationship between teachers' reading conceptions and instructional practice.

We found that the teachers did, when explaining instructional decisions, make enough reading statements to indicate that they possess reading conceptions and, in most cases, their observed behavior and time use tended to reflect their statements.

Simultaneously, however, teachers offered many other statements to explain their instructional decisions. These statements, when categorized, represent non-reading conceptions which, in some cases, dominate the reading conceptions; that is, when faced with a classroom decision which brings the reading and non-reading conceptions into conflict, the teacher tends to be guided more by the non-reading than the reading conceptions.

Further, teachers' decisions seem to be influenced more by the teaching context than by a particular conception. For instance, teacher conceptions are likely to change if the grade level and/or the ability of the pupil(s) being taught changes.

Seven General Principles

Our results suggest seven general principles regarding teacher conceptions.

First, *teachers do have conceptions of reading.* In fact, all 23 teachers observed made five or more statements in at least one category of reading or reading instruction, thereby meeting the criterion for having a conception of reading.

Second, *most teachers have more than one conception of reading.* In fact, of the 23 teachers studied, 20 had two or more conceptions of reading. This can be seen in Figure 2, a graphic representation of two teachers' conceptions.

In cases where teachers have multiple conceptions of reading, they tend to select similar conceptions. For instance, a teacher who holds a "basal" conception is likely to also hold a "phonetic skills" or "sight words" conception (these are all content-centered) and is less likely to hold a "self-selection of trade books" or a "language experience" conception (pupil-centered conceptions).

Third, *teachers also explain their instructional decisions with categorizable statements that represent "non-reading" conceptions* (see Figure 2, Teacher 3B). Some teachers, for example, base instructional decisions on conceptions about mutual teacher-pupil respect, classroom management and routine, the amount of assistance needed by low or high ability pupils, the way pupils learn, social/emotional characteristics,

and others. Fifteen of the 23 teachers offered such non-reading conceptions (as well as reading conceptions) as explanations for their instructional decisions.

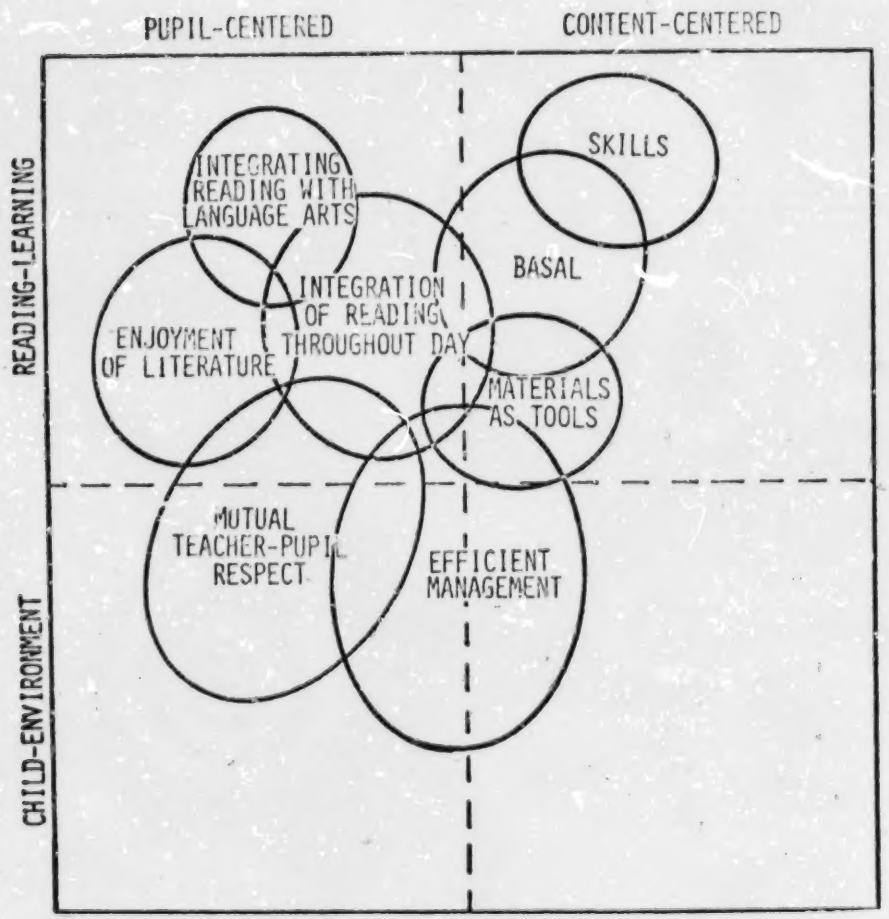
Fourth, it is also clear that *some teachers possess more complex conceptions than others* (see Figure 2). This complexity is seen both in the number of conceptions a teacher espouses and in the number of statements the teacher generates to support each conception. At one extreme, Teacher 3B (Figure 2) espoused eight categories of conceptions; Teacher 4B espoused only one. Similarly, some teachers generate only the minimum number of statements about an aspect of reading, which barely qualifies the category as a conception. Other teachers, however, generate a dozen or more statements about a particular conception, thereby suggesting that their conception may be more complex or richer.

Fifth, *teacher conceptions seem to vary in stability from teacher to teacher.* In other words, some teachers maintain the same conceptions and the same practices throughout the school year, while other teachers' conceptions seem to be in transition; one conception may gradually grow in importance in the teacher's mind while others diminish in importance. As an example, Figure 3 shows that the category of "developmental stages of growth" was an important factor influencing Teacher 6B's instruction at the end of the school year. This category grew in importance during the year. The dotted line within the circle represents the size that category was at the beginning of the school year.

Sixth, it appears that *a teacher's reading conception may be related to the grade level taught and to the pupils' ability level.* For instance, seven of eight first-grade teachers espoused "content-oriented" conceptions, with the eighth taking an eclectic position. On the other hand,

TEACHER # 3B

WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS



TEACHER # 4B

WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS

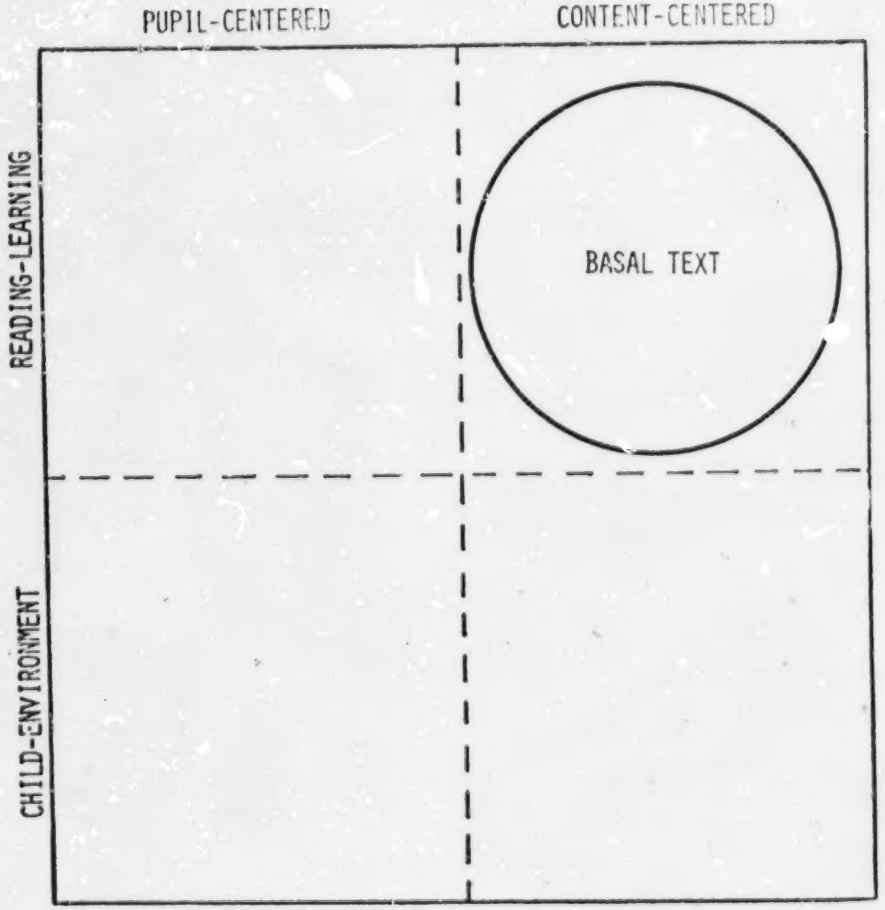


FIGURE 2. Each circle represents a category of statements and varies in size according to the importance the teacher assigns to them. The circles are also arranged in quadrants that represent either pupil-centered or content centered categories as well as reading-learning based or child-environment based categories.

the teachers who espoused the most "pupil-oriented" positions teach second grade or above. Similarly, teachers often seem to have a particular ability group in mind when they make statements about reading. This phenomenon was evidenced by the fact that "pupil-oriented" teachers often said their conception would change if their pupils were less able, and "content-oriented" teachers said their conception would change if their pupils were more able.

Finally, investigation of the genesis of teacher conceptions reveals that *teachers modify and change their conceptions of reading and reading instruction over time.* Many sources seem to trigger such changes, including teaching experiences, and life experiences in general. Teacher education classes in reading methodology, however, appear to be one of the *least* influential sources of change.

The Relationship Between Conceptions and Practice

The study of classrooms indicates that teacher conceptions of reading are reflected in instructional practices. The practices of all but four of the 23 teachers studied reflected their stated conceptions. A teacher espousing a "basal" conception, for example, was observed conducting activities typically associated with basal text instruction, and analysis of her time use revealed that she spent 50% of her time in guided reading of basal stories and another 35% in related skill instruction. A teacher espousing a more "pupil-centered" conception, on the other hand, was observed conducting a variety of instructional activities and, while she devoted 55% of her time to basals and related skills, she also devoted 35% of her time to the affective and oral language dimensions of reading (see Figure 4). Generally, these consistent relationships between conception and instructional practice are evident among all teachers.

TEACHER # 6B

WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS

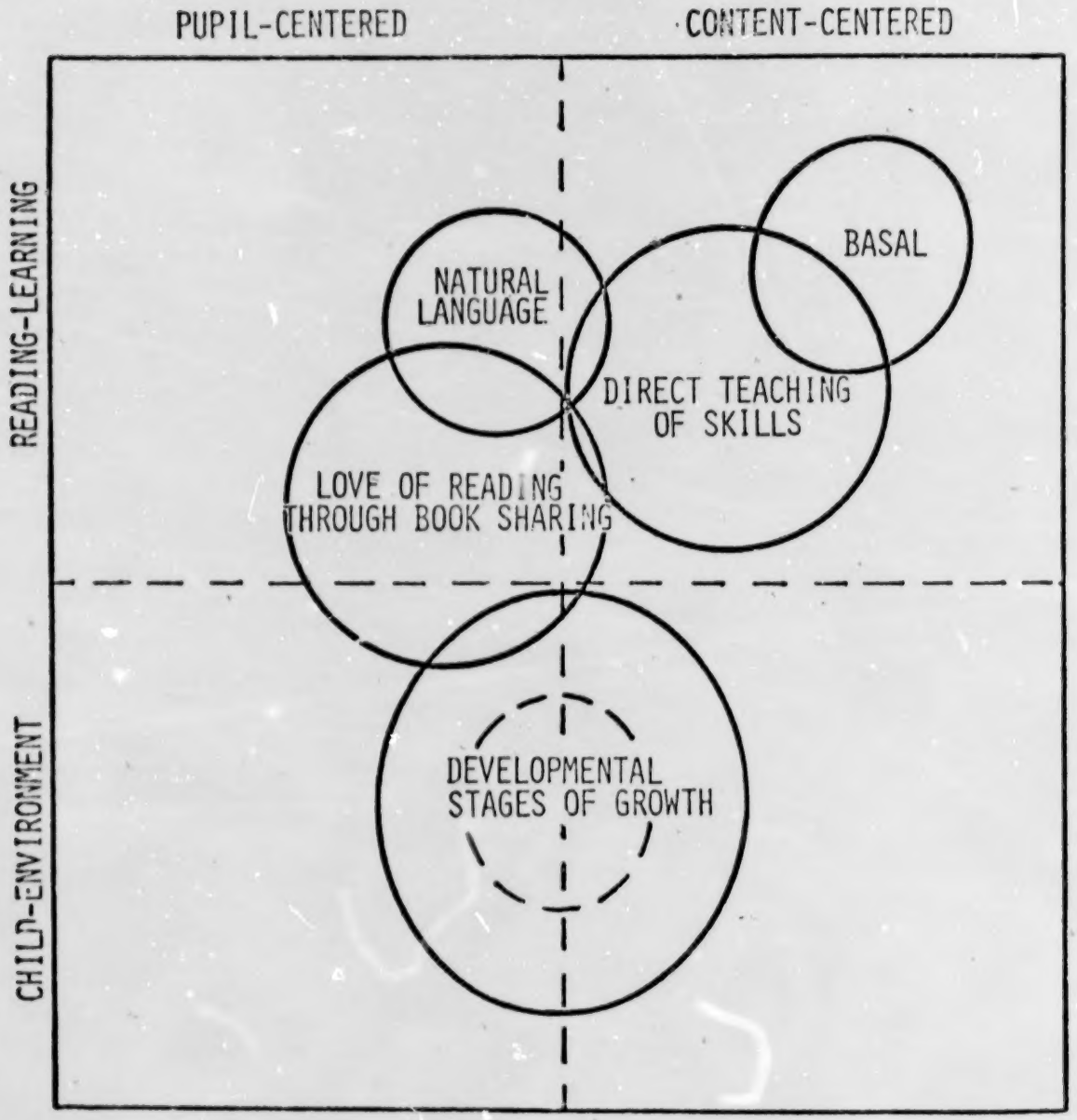


FIGURE 3

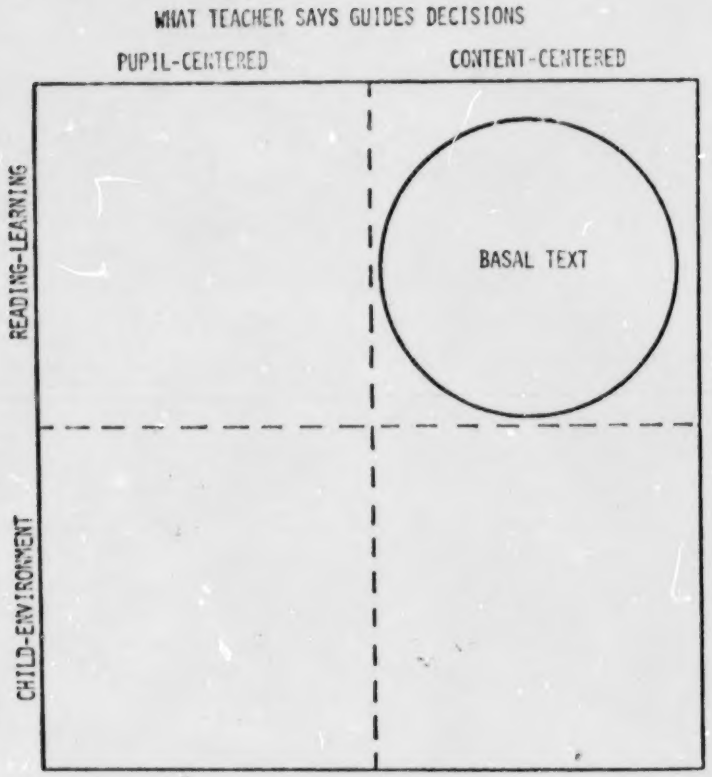
Do Reading Conceptions Govern Instructional Practice

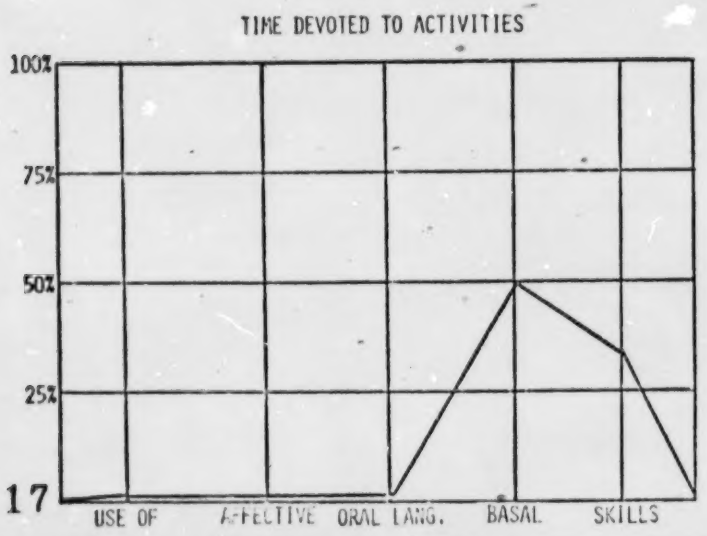
Despite the fact that the instructional practices of most teachers reflected their reading conceptions, it is not possible to state that instructional decision making in reading is exclusively guided by reading conceptions. Instead, reading conceptions appear to be but one of several influences on the teacher's behavior; the reading conception is filtered through and modified by other influences and, when applied to classroom practice, is a unique reflection of all these influences.

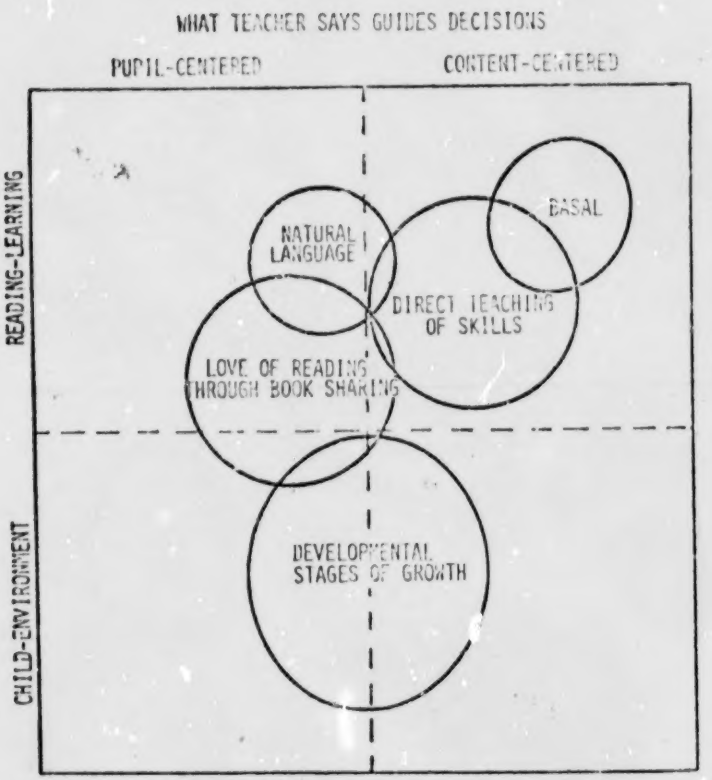
Paramount among these influences is the presence of other conceptions of a non-reading nature. All but eight of the 23 teachers possessed such non-reading conceptions, which modified decision making during reading. Further, for seven of the 15 teachers having non-reading conceptions, such conceptions seem to dominate the teacher's mind and influence observed practice more than the reading conception.

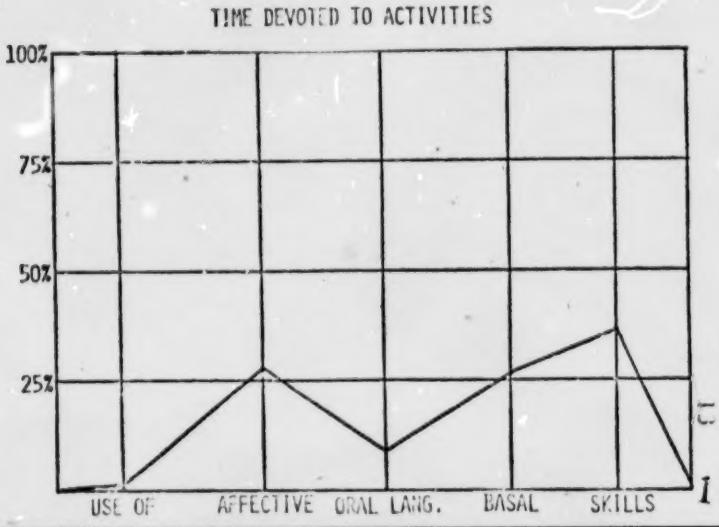
Another influence is the existence of an apparently implicit belief among teachers that beginning readers (either first-graders or pupils who read like first-graders) must receive "content-oriented" instruction. Five of the teachers studied made this distinction clear in their statements, while the observed practice of seven others indicated that they too were making a similar distinction. The implication seems to be that teachers possess yet another type of conception, a conception that children reading at a low level need more structure and content than other children, and that the "pupil-centered" concepts such as those embodied in natural language, interest, and integrated curriculum activities must be saved until the pupil is able to read independently.

FIGURE 4


WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS
PUPIL-CENTERED
CONTENT-CENTERED
READING-LEARNING
CHILD-ENVIRONMENT
BASAL TEXT


TIME DEVOTED TO ACTIVITIES
100%
75%
50%
25%
USE OF
AFFECTIVE
ORAL LANG.
BASAL
SKILLS


WHAT TEACHER SAYS GUIDES DECISIONS
PUPIL-CENTERED
CONTENT-CENTERED
READING-LEARNING
CHILD-ENVIRONMENT
NATURAL LANGUAGE
BASAL
DIRECT TEACHING OF SKILLS
LOVE OF READING THROUGH BOOK SHARING
DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF GROWTH


TIME DEVOTED TO ACTIVITIES
100%
75%
50%
25%
USE OF
AFFECTIVE
ORAL LANG.
BASAL
SKILLS

Conclusions

The ultimate goal of this research is to identify a key ingredient that distinguishes effective teachers from ineffective ones. To date, the data do not support the basic hypothesis that effective reading teachers are necessarily those who analyze the instructional situation in terms of a reading conception. Instead, the interaction between instruction in reading and reading conceptions is a complex one; teachers apparently have many different kinds of conceptions, all of which modify their instructional decision making in subtle but significant ways. Further, it is clear that identical conceptions can be employed in qualitatively different ways.

We found that contrary to the hypotheses of Kamil and Pearson (1979), Carroll and Chall (1975), and others noted at the outset of this paper, reading conceptions and instructional practices are not related in a simple, linear way, nor is there support for Harste and Burke's (1977) implication that teachers' decisions are based exclusivley on an implicit theory of reading. Rather, the relationship between a teacher's reading beliefs and instructional decision making appears to be fluid; a teacher's conception of reading is a "free-floating" element which has little meaning until it is filtered through the teacher's non-reading conceptions and applied to a specific teaching context.

Future Research

Much more remains to be done in the quest to understand how the mental life of teachers separates effective teachers from ineffective ones. The first step, of course, is to continue the study of teacher conceptions and observed practice to gain better understanding of how teacher

conceptions influence instructional decision making. Second, pupil outcome measures (which have been collected for the 13 1978-79 classrooms) must be analyzed to determine what impact differential teacher conceptions and practices have on pupils. Third, additional avenues of study are suggested by the following facts: that some teachers apparently have conceptions which do not interact with each other in any meaningful way; some teachers apparently have a single-dimension conception, while others have multi-faceted conceptions; some teachers operate reading programs under stringent institutional mandates, while others are free to do what they want;[4] some teachers have strong administrative support while others have little; and the conceptions of some teachers appear to be much stronger (or are adhered to with more consistency) than those of others. Finally, as more is learned about teacher conceptions and their influence on instructional practice, it becomes more and more important to trace their genesis and development. Only through an understanding of how conceptions are created and nurtured will we be able to apply the findings to the teacher training process and, thereby, positively influence the teaching of reading in classrooms.

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[4]Teachers who are participating in the study come from both low and high SES schools, and from both schools with and without mandated reading programs. The type of school was determined by both Michigan State Education Department data regarding SES and by school district policy regarding the presence or absence of instructional/curricular mandates. The data will be analyzed to determine how these factors affect conceptions.

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